DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 274 009 CS 505 370

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TITLE Critical Research and the Problem of Multi-Level Analysis: Notes on Connecting Micro Events and Macro Structures.
PUB DATE May 86
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (36th, Chicago, IL, May 22-26, 1986).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Research; *Organizational Communication; *Research Methodology; Social Structure; Theories; *Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Multilevel Analysis; Theory Development

ABSTRACT

Critical approaches to the study of society and organizations tend to favor theories and models that stress the complexity and multiplicity of social factors and processes and the relations between them. In conceptualizing the relationship between social structure and human agency, critical theorists have attempted to walk a fine line between structural determinism and individualistic voluntarism by developing ideas such as the "duality of structure" or the "double articulation of social structure and human agency." While these ideas are theoretically appealing, their empirical applications are not easily made. A review of the literature reveals the ways various authors have theorized the relationship between structure and agency, including structuralism, individualism, structuration, and critical structuralism. These theories, however, have created problems for organizational communication research, including conceptual difficulties related to multilevel analysis and practical methodological problems that arise when researchers attempt to move from the level of theory to the level of research and action. The literature proposes several strategies for dealing with these problems, among them the use of (1) ideal types, (2) abstraction, and (3) a focus on the extremes of conditions. A list of 42 references is appended. (FL)

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CRITICAL RESEARCH AND THE PROBLEM OF MULTI-LEVEL ANALYSIS: NOTES ON CONNECTING MICRO EVENTS AND MACRO STRUCTURES

Paper Presented
at the 36th Annual Conference of the
International Communication Association
Philosophy of Communication Division

Chicago, Illinois
May, 1986

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ABSTRACT

Critical communication approaches frequently use a model of society which stresses the complexity and multiplicity of social factors and processes and the relations between them. In conceptualizing the relationship between social structure and human agency critical theorists have attempted to walk a fine line between structural determinism and individualistic voluntarism by developing ideas like the "duality of structure" or the "double articulation of social structure and human agency". While these ideas are theoretically appealing, empirical applications of these concepts are less easily made. This paper is an attempt to facilitate the transition from theory to research -and back- by working through some of the methodological problems and issues posed by the use of multiple levels of analysis. After reviewing how various authors conceptualize the relationship between social structure and agency, suggestions are offered for connecting micro-and macro-level phenomena and processes, with a special focus on organizational research.

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CRITICAL RESEARCH AND THE PROBLEM OF MULTI-LEVEL ANALYSIS: NOTES ON CONNECTING MICRO EVENTS AND MACRO STRUCTURES

Over the past few years, the critical approach to communication has been recognized and used increasingly. In spite of the considerable differences that can be found within the critical approach, two common strands can typically be identified: the idea of critique and the concept of non-linear causality.

The first common concern of critical approaches is the position of critique. Described most generally as "reflection on a system of constraints which are humanly produced: pressures to which groups of individuals, or a whole society succumb in their process of self-transformation" (Connerton, 1978:18), the position of critique questions the "naturalness" of human experience. Critique seeks to undermine "the everyday attitude that identifies what one perceives with what is (Appelbaum & Cotiner, 1979:74) and bring to the surface the underlying processes and relationships which shape and govern the surface world.

This concern with revealing deep structures and realities is combined in most critical approaches with a second common idea, namely a conception of the social world which stresses the complexity and multiplicity of existing relationships. In emphasizing complex and multiple relationships, critical approaches seek to connect seemingly separate ideas and processes such as social structure and human agency, the material and the symbolic, and soforth.

Grossberg(1984) in an excellent recent review, has shown the many ways in which different critical approaches conceptualize the relationship between society and culture. While the differences in some cases are quite substantial, all critical approaches conceptually maintain the the idea of an inherent complexity in social relationships, attempting to avoid -albeit with different degrees of success- extremes of structural determinism and individualistic voluntarism. In most cases these extremes are avoided by proposing some concept which stresses processes of mutual determination and influence thought to operate between human symbolic activity on the one hand and society or social structure on the other.

While ideas like the "duality of structure"(Giddens, 1980) or the "double articulation of social structure and human praxis" (Bhaskar, 1983) have great theoretical appeal, if only because they avoid the artifial dualisms characteristic of most conventional social theory, the transition however from theoretical development to research and action has not been very effective to date. Studies employing the critical approach in some form or another remain relatively rare, especicially in the area of organizational communication. While there are undoubtedly many reasons for the paucity of critical organizational research, the issue of multi-level analysis has been a major obstacle in the development of organizational studies, posing conceptual as well as methodological problems..

One, since most of the critical theoretical discussions take place at the level of society, many have found it difficult to translate social level concepts to the organizational level. Two, the connection between micro-events and macro-structures is unclear. While ideas like multiple levels of relations and complex patterns of causation are attractive at the level of theory, they pose problems at the level of research and explanation. Three, the role of organizations in society is often inadequately conceptualized. Even though organizations are the site of the reproduction of essential economic, political and ideological relations, many critical theorists focus their discussion on general and abstract social processes, leaving undefined the nature and role of organizations in the larger scheme of things.

This discussion will attempt to stimulate the development of critical organizational communication studies by working through some of the aspects of the problem of multi-level analysis, or, to be more precise, the problem of making the connection, in research and action, between organizational (and intra-organizational) level phenomena and the social context. In order to focus the problem, I will begin with a brief review, discussing the ways in which various authors have theorized the complex relationships between structure and agency. Next, I will discuss the ways in which these theories create particular difficulties for organizational research. In the remainder of the paper I will offer some suggestions and strategies designed to facilitate the making of sound connections between the various levels of action and abstraction.

PREVIOUS FORMULATIONS : STRUCTURALISM VERSUS INDIVIDUALISM

Previously, issues of the relationship between human interaction and social structure have been debated within the individualist/structuralist controversy. While much of this debate concerns the issue of the level of analysis, the source of the controversy extends beyond this into competing definitions of the nature of social reality (Pfeffer, 1982).

The individualist position holds that "social structure is nothing more than the behavior of individuals" (Collins, 1975:436). Groups, organizations and society are explained as aggregates of individuals, while individual behavior itself is explained as a function of individual values, interests, and the like. Consequently, the relationship between micro events and macro structures is described as follows:

> ..the active agents in any sociological explanation must be micro-situational. Social patterns, institutions and organizations are only abstractions from the behavior of individuals and summaries of the distribution of different microbehaviors in time and space. These abstractions and summaries do not do anything... the dynamics as well as the inertia in any causal explanation of social structure must be microsituational: all macroconditions have their effects by impinging upon actors' situational motivations (Collins, 1981:989-990).

Individualists, according to Mayhew (1980:339) "assume the existence of social structures in order to study their impact on individuals. Structuralists on the other hand see it as their primary task

> ...not to assume the empirical conditions of social structure, but to explain its existence in the first place... If one assumes the structure of society in order to examine its impact on the immediate acts, thoughts, and feelings of individuals, one has assumed most of what has to be explained in order to study a small part of human activity and experience (Mayhew, 1980:339-340).

Structuralists clearly are not interested in studying individual human behavior. What they are interested in is the study of the "behavior of the variables which define various aspects of social organization, its population, environment, ideological and technological subsystems" (Mayhew, 1980:339).

> In this structuralist conception of social life, sociologists are studying a communication network mapped on some human population. That network, the interaction which proceeds through it, and the social structures which emerge in it are the (proper) subject matter (Mayhew, 1980:338).

The individualist/structuralist controversy represents two incompatible theoretical positions, each disallowing the focal concern of the other. The methodological implications of each position also vary greatly. For the structuralist, the primary interest is in variations in social structure patterns which are studied and explained by linking together social level variables. Human behavior , if of interest at all, is simply viewed as a function of social structure and social structure variations. Conversely, for the individualist, variations in social structure are of interest only in sofar as they are seen as the outcome of variations in individual level properties. "(T)he relationship between man and society is one of human control, in which society is a derivative of human agency" (Dawe, 1978:375; Mayhew, 1981). Individualist approaches then focus on identifying patterns in individual level variables and establishing causal relations to social level conditions.

THE CRITICAL POSITION ON SOCIAL REALITY : GENERAL CONCEPTS

The critical perspective rejects both voluntaristic individualism and deterministic structuralism on the grounds that each provides an inadequate and incomplete analysis of social reality. The alternative proposed by the critical approach offers a view of the social world which takes into account both social structure and human agency and theorizes some form of a complex relationship between the two.

Generally, this is accomplished using the following line of reasoning:

1. The social world is socially produced and "reproduced in and through the everyday practices of people" (Benson, 1983:332). These practices include subjective and intersubjective interpretations as well as observable enactments, resulting in objective routines, structures and conditions (Heydebrand, 1983). Once established, subjective and objective constructions become objectified, develop their own determinate tendencies and shape future social reproductions. This establishes the social world as consisting of both objective and subjective social processes, in which social structures and human agency exist in a mutually dependent and determining relationship. The social world thus constructed is not unproblematic. It contains "contradictions", understood as opposing forces or as confrontations between opposing forms of social life. This on the one hand stresses the non-unitary nature of social constructions. On the other hand, it presents the maintenance of social constructions as the essential problematic for investigation.

2. Multiple levels of reality exist. Most critical positions do not confine social explanation to the level of the empirical or self-evident. Instead, using concepts like "surface" and "deep" structure or the "realms of the empirical, the actual and the real", complex, non-linear explanations of social phenomena are formulated. Ideally, these explanations place causality in the complex relationships between generative mechanisms and levels of reality, thus avoiding simple determinism .

3. Social reality is systematically distorted. The way in which social reality presents itself to us is itself seen as the outcome of complex processes of mediation, generating systematic distortions that serve to maintain existing social arrangements and relations. The content of social productions is non-arbitrary, in other words, and serves to conceal, link and distort problematic social conditions.

The above discussion is obviously very general and different critical positions take different approaches to linking structure and agency. To illustrate this, two specific examples will be briefly reviewed next: 1) Giddens' theory of structuration; and 2) Althusserian structuralism.

ONE EXAMPLE : GIDDENS' THEORY OF STRUCTURATION

Giddens' (1984;1981) theory of structuration and related theories of realism (Bhaskar, 1979, 1983; Manicas, 1980) provide one example of a critical attempt to sort out the connections between structure and agency. In an attempt to avoid a conceptual dualism between structure and agency, Giddens proposes the idea of "duality of structure".

Social structure is seen as both the medium and the outcome of human agency, "the pre-given idioms which shape human conduct, and the reproduced results of human action" (Isaac, 1983:303). Bhaskar (1983) in a related position describes the relationship as one of "double articulation", where in social structure and human praxis are connected through relations of enablement/constraint and reproduction/transformation:

> ..(A) transcendental argument from intentional agency establishes the (relative) autonomy, sui generis reality and temporal pre-existence of society as a transcendentally necessary condition for it, as its means and medium. But if society is the condition of our agency, it exists and persists only through it, so that human agency is equally an existentially necessary condition for society, as it continually reproduces or transforms the latter (Bhaskar, 1983:83-84).

Human action is seen as "the transformation of pre-given materials by intentional human subjects". Human agency, in other words, "has social pre-conditions, these conditions being the relatively enduring relations (e.g. husband/wife, capitalist/worker) which complexly constitute society" (Isaac, 1983:303). Thus, while the idea of "reproduced relations" presents actors as actively involved in the reproduction process, it also refers to historical, objective and relatively enduring social facts; the idea that these relations "have already been produced in an historical sense, in order that agents are able to reproduce them" (Layder, 1985:144).

Issues of power and domination figure central in most critical approaches and the structuration perspective is no exception. In Giddens' formulation, communication, power and sanctions are the essential components of human interaction. These components are connected to structural properties in a fashion consistent with the position of duality. Structural properties of domination for example are both drawn upon and reproduced by actors in interaction while social systems are produced and reproduced through and in the combined structures of signification, domination and legitimation.

Power remains closely tied to the idea of human agency though in two ways. First, Giddens sees power as relations of autonomy and dependency between actors, rather than as a structural property. Second, Giddens insists on a criterion of instanciation, whereby structures are seen as existing only when and as reproduced by actors.

By contrast, Layder(1985), while accepting most Giddens' position, offers a much more structural approach to power and domination, arguing that "(t)he very idea of reproduced relations requires some reference to the prior structural conditions under which agency operates. These conditions are intrinsically relations of power between groups in society, and as such are structural, collective properties" (p.144). Applying this to the study of organizational control Layder states:

> ...power and control over workers is not simply a function of specific exercises or non-exercises of power, but is quite centrally a function of pre-existing and enduring asymmetries of control and access, which are reproduced in a routine day to day fashion. In this structural sense, power represents prior and enduring constraints upon workers' behaviour. To say this however, is not to say that workers' behaviour is totally determined, in the sense of

> implying that they are cultural dopes. It does, however, imply that power in these sorts of contexts is not simply a negotiable outcome of the routine and concrete interactions and relationships of the worksplace. The behaviour and power of workers in these circumstances is severely circumscribed by prior structural relations (Layder, 1985:146).

In sum, the essential interest of the theory of structuration is in human practice and in the structural conditions of human practice, seeking to examine how the two combine in the reproduction of social systems. The above discussion showed not only how the theory of structuration seeks to connect structure with human agency using the idea of duality, but also how within this general approach differences of emphasis exist about the relative autonomy or dependence of one or the other.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE : ALTHUSSER'S STRUCTURALISM AND THE STUDY OF IDEOLOGY

A different way of conceptualizing the nature of social relations and processes can be found in the critical structuralist position, represented by among others Althusser(1971, 1969) and Therborn(1980).

In this approach the particular pattern of productive and social relations in a given society -referred to as the mode of production- is seen as dependent upon a whole range of social relations and structures. Economic practices and power relations are not seen as self-sustaining. They depend for their continuation on a complex, corresponding set of political, ideological and theoretical practices, together forming "the totality of social dimensions of the productive process (Wright,1983:83). Analysis focuses on determining the ways in which the dominant mode of production is reproduced by assessing the specific form of the relations between the various practices, thus revealing the "structure in dominance".

Essential to this approach is the idea of "structural causality":

> Once the whole of a social formation is conceived as a structured whole in which the different structures are differentiated by the domination/subordination relations that they have with each other, then we can no longer think of the whole as source or origin of the different structures which constitute the whole, nor can we suppose that the social formation itself possesses a center or essence in a particular structure from which all determinations begin. The social formation is an already-given-whole that dissimulates itself into its effects, since the effects are not outside or distinct from the structure itself (Emerson, 1984:213).

The proposed connection between social structures and human subjects shows most clearly in the concept of ideology. In the structuralist approach, ideology is said to operate in the formation and transformation of human subjectivity (Therborn, 1980). Ideology is "the medium through which social reality, consciousness, and meaningfulness are constructed" (Deetz & Kersten, 1983:162).

Ideologies provide subjects with a particular rendition of social reality, specifying what is real, desireable and possible. Through a process of "subject-qualification", individual subjectivity is formed and transformed on the basis of this particular rendition of reality. In this process, individuals are simultaneously "subjected to a particular order that favors and allows certain drives and capacities and disfavors others" and "become qualified to take up and perform the repertoire of roles given in the society to which they are born "(Therborn, 980:18). As Grossberg(1984:410) describes it :"the individual becomes complicitous with his or her own insertion into the ideological production of an imaginary but lived reality".

While ideology thus operates in the constitution of human subjectivity, ideology is also linked to objective social structures. Two connections are important here. One, ideological specifications are inscribed in --or evidenced in-- material expressions. For an ideology to work, so to speak, it must be "backed up" by the material world. In this sense, ideological relations have a very real quality about them. Two, ideology serves to support and sustain existing social arrangements. As Thompson(1984:182) describes it :"to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination". Thompson(1983) cites three ideological operations as central: 1)legitimation, whereby systems of domination are sustained through a cultivated belief in their legitimacy; 2)dissimulation, which serves to conceal, deny or misrepresent existing power relations; and 3)reification, though which existing arrangements are presented as permanent, natural, real and independent of any human decision or participation.

Contrary to the theory of structuration, critical structuralism seeks to emphasize the primacy of social structure in the explanation of social phenomena. While conceptualizing human subjectivity -through ideology- the form and content of this subjectivity are ultimately to understood only through the requirements of the existing mode of production.

OTHER FORMULATIONS

The discussion sofar has reviewed two different critical approaches to linking social structure and human agency. Each of the approaches has a different emphasis. The theory of structuration, in using the criterion of instanciation, seems to emphasize agency as the primary factor, making structure dependent upon action. Althusser's brand of structuralism sees the complex relations between the various practices as primary, and human subjectivity as secondary.

Obviously other connections are possible. Grossberg's (1984) revie organizes the different theories into:

1)classical approaches, which see culture as a reflection of society and hence, propose a relatively unproblematic relationship betwee meaning and social structure; examples are theories of fals consciousness, critical theory and economism.

2)hermeneutic approaches, which see culture as a representation o society; the relationship between text and social experience is see variably as mediation through structure, through appropriation, through signifying practices or through narrative.

3)discursive approaches: here, "culture produces not only the structures of experience but experience itself, which functions within social structures of domination". Discursive approaches theorize either a positioning of the subject; an articulation of the subject; or the idea of materializing power : "(n)either the subject nor the terms in which power is organized exist outside of th(e) fabric of material effects"(Grossberg, 1984:418).

PROBLEMS IN CRITICAL ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Critical research in the area of organizations and organizational communication is still hard to find. Most organizational communicatior researchers however have very limited interest in the critical approach; and those that are interested have had to deal with a number of other obstacles.

The first obstacle is political in nature. Organizational research depends in part on cooperation from company management. They however, are not likely to facilitate or finance research which may be perceived as threatening or as not serving the organizational interests. (Melody & Mansell, 1983:111).

Recently both Deetz(1985) and Riley(1985) have stressed the necessity for enhanced cooperation between organizations and researchers. The avenues suggested by them may, when implemented, solve many of the immediate, practical difficulties. Even without such increased cooperation, though, organizational research is possible. Researchers may elect to engage in differing degrees of covert research or may attempt to enter the organization at levels other than the management level.

A second reason for the paucity of organizational research is methodological in nature. Most organizational researchers have been schooled in conventional methods and strategies for research, ill-suited to critical studies. Recent efforts to clarify the relationship between critical ontology and methods (Kersten, 1985) and to provide examples of the way in which methods are used in critical research (Morgan, 1983) may have been helpful, but the issue still requires elaboration.

Thirdly there is the issue of multilevel analysis, which poses both conceptual and methodological difficulties. As we have seen, critical approaches typically theorize the existence of a complext set of relatuions between structure and agency, and between microlevel events and macrolevel arrangements. Even though the exact theoretizations vary, the problems they pose for research and analysis are quity similar. The following section will briefly elaborate on the major problems, indicating the areas and issues which seem most resistant in making the connection between levels and identifying some of the practical methodological problems that arise when one attempts to move from the level of theory to the level of research and action, particularly in the area of critical organizational research.

THE PROBLEM OF MULTI-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The first problem deals with some of the conceptual difficulties related to the micro-macro level distinction. Critical theory is typically formulated in the context of society, discussing general social mechanisms, tendencies and phenomena. Conceptually, this creates what one might call a translation problem. Can social level concepts be "translated" to the organizational level, without losing their meaning or usefulness? If the concepts can be adapted, what guidelines should be used? How is the idea of "structure-in-dominance" for example applied at the organizational level?

The second problem concerns the way in which organizations are conceptualized. Most critical approaches are concerned with general social processes and phenomena and, except for some general comments on what are typically regarded as the oppressive characteristics of modern bureaucracy, they remain silent in the area of organizations. Are organizations, as some would argue, simply the site at which modes of production are reproduced? In this formulation, the process of reproduction is shaped by the general social relations and remains unaffected by organizational dynamics. Alternatively, we can theorize organizations as relatively self-contained. This is the position of most of the conventional organizational literature, which reasons that organizational level phenomena are best explained by organizational level variables, or, worse yet, by variations in individual properties. A last possibility is to conceptualize relations between the organization as a social phenomenon, allowing for organizational level processes and dynamics, as well as for social effects. Even this approach, however, taken effectively by e.g. Clegg (1980), still leaves the specific problem of the level of analysis unresolved.

The level of analysis problem creates a number of practical and methodological difficulties for the organizational researcher. While it makes good theoretical sense to conceptualize explanatory processes and relations at both the micro and the macro level, it creates confusion when it comes to collecting and interpreting data. If we use the levels sequentially, how do we determine which comes first? Or, perhaps more importantly, which comes last? Also, how do we preserve the theoretical relationship between the two levels, if they are separated in the process of analysis? What are the implications for the type of data collection we engage in?

On the one hand, some of these questions are questions only because we tend to prefer simple, neatly ordered programmes and explanations. On the other hand however the critical approach has been lacking in the development of guidelines and examplars for research and in the absence of these, the relative lack of empirical investigation becomes easier to understand, if still regrettable.

Of course, it should be kept in mind that critical methodology and analysis will never have the prescriptive, protocol character of conventional research approaches. Critical research at its best is not a series of simple, sequential steps, but rather an overall approach: " a complex of policies and strategies that permit a given problematic to be understood, analyzed, acted on, and resolved or transformed" (Heydebrand, 1983: 312). Ultimately, it is the phenomenon studied that dictates the particular choice of concepts, methods and approach.

Having acknowledged this, the next section will develop some general guidelines and suggestions, which, if properly applied, may facilitate organizational research in the critical tradition. First, I will present critical research as theoretically guided, meaning that the research question itself should enable critique and acknowledge the existence of complex social relations. Second, critical research will be described as the ongoing development of understanding, an idea which refers to the process of re-description or interpretation that is central in critical analysis. The issue of the direction of analysis will also be addressed here. Third, the importance of organizational and social models will be discussed. Finally, the last section will examine the issue of generalization.

ANALYSIS MUST BE GUIDED BY THEORY

Deetz(1985:15) describes the critical approach as "a theoretically guided political praxis". This description highlights the fact that in critical research the links from (and back to) the theoretical framework and forward to (and back from) action are more important and more continuous than is the case in conventional approaches. Critical research is clearly theory-laden (I prefer the term theoretically guided) in that research questions and strategies are focused by the theoretical framework used by the researcher. The most important part of the connection between theory and research however exists in the theory's impact of the "proper" phrasing or focusing of the research interest. Two guidelines for focusing the research interest can be formulated, based on the central ideas of critique and non-linear causality.

Research Interests Should Enable Critique

First, the nature of the question must reflect the idea of critique, i.e. the interest in revealing contradictions and opposing forces in the existing social system. Often times critique is hindered or facilitated simply by the way in which we focus our research interest. A by now well-known example of this is found in Burawoy's (1979) study of factory relations. Whereas studies of worker behavior and productivity typically phrase their interest around questions such as

'Why don't workers work harder?', Burawoy's was interested in the question 'Why do workers work as hard as they do?' .Clearly, while the first question accepts production as a natural and legitimate condition, thus thwarting the possibility of critique, the second question forces critique by properly viewing cooperation and production as accomplished constructions.

The study of power provides some other examples. The study of power in organizations has typically been based on - and I believe hampered by- an agency based concept of power. Power and control are presented as resting in the hands of individuals who may or may not elect to exercise these powers. Obviously, power thus conceptualized obscures from examination the structural basis for power as well as the overall conditions for and effects of its existence and exercise. Studies using this conception easily accept existing structures as legitimate and become entangled in investigating individual motives and attributes. We can contrast this with for example Foucault's (1980) discussion on power.

Foucault suggests that the study of power, broadly interpreted, has been organized from medieval times around the idea of legitimacy:

> ...the essential function of the discourse and technique of right has been to efface the domination intrinsic to power in order to present the latter at the level of appearance under two different aspects: on the one hand, as the legitimate rights of sovereignty, and on the other, as the legal obligation to obey it (Foucault, 1980:95).

By contrast, Foucault's intention in studying power is to "reverse the mode of analysis...to invert it, to give due weight that is, to the fact of domination, to expose both its latent nature and its brutality... Right should be viewed not in terms of a legimacy to be established, but in terms of the methods of subjugation that it instigates" (Foucault, 1980:95-96). Clearly, Foucault's very formulation of his concern, which moves the attention away from rights as the legitimacy of power and to right as the instrument and medium of domination, enables as well as facilitates the critique of power relations.

The point here is that the quality of critical analysis is at least in part dependent upon the relationship between theory and research. Specifically, using critical theories as our guide, research interests should be conceptualized and formulated in such a way as to force and facilitate critique. In many cases this has the effect of shifting the interest away from the individual level and towards macro or relational levels.

Research Interests Should Acknowledge Complex Relations

Since the idea of complex, relational causality is so central in critical theories, it should be central also in critical research. This guideline suggests that the research question should focus attention on relations and conditions, rather than on particular, isolated expressions and manifestations.

> ..the analysis should not concern itself with power at the level of conscious intention or decision; it should not attempt to consider power from its internal point of view and ...it should refrain from posing the labyrinthine and unanswerable question: 'Who then has power and what has he in mind?'...Instead it is a case of studying power at the point where its intention, if it has one, is completely invested in its real and effective practices. Let us not, therefore, ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask instead how things work at the level of on-going subjugation...In other words, rather than ask ourselves how the sovereign appears to us in his lofty isolation, we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, thoughts, etc. (Foucault, 1980:97).

At the theoretical level, critical approaches remove part of the artificiality of the micro/ macro distinction by conceptualizing complex and multiple relations connecting and intersecting between levels. At the research level, a first step towards carrying this through is accomplished by properly focusing the research interest, i.e. making sure that the research interest reflects and accomodates both the idea of critique and idea of complex relations. The intended effect of this is to enable the researcher to observe - collect data and the like- a phenomenon at the microlevel, while understanding it at the macrolevel. This idea is further developed in the next section.

RESEARCH AS THE ON-GOING DEVELOPMENT OF UNDERSTANDING

The critical position asserts that social reality is not self-evident or self-explanatory; that explanations of social reality should not be located at the empirical level, but should instead be grounded in real generative mechanisms and tendencies; and that, as Hall(1985) has convincingly argued, no necessary correspondences exist between different practices and effects in a social formation.

Given this perspective, the idea of a linear relationship between data, analysis and research is replaced by a concept of research as the ongoing process of the development of understanding, involving a continuous interaction between empirical description and theoretical explanation:

> This is not a one-sided interaction dominated by factual observations (empiricism) or by theory. Rather, there must be a continuing refinement of the (theoretical) model on the basis of more focused observations and of theoretical reflection, not simply of the facts immediately at hand but ranging across an array of accumulating knowledge of the social formation (Benson, 1983:334).

Seeing research as the ongoing development of understanding involves two questions that must be dealt with: 1)the interpretive side of research; and 2)the direction interpretation must take.

Research as interpretation

The idea of research as interpretation is relevant in two ways. First, as described by Giddens(1983:75-76),all descriptions of human conduct are hermeneutic:

> All social research involves a process of what I would describe as the circling in and out of the forms of life that are the concern of analysis- picking up, developing, scrutinizing the mutual knowledge which is both the "means of access" to and the "research descriptions" derived from social investigations.

Second, and more important, critical analysis in locating explanations of social phenomena in the totality of complex underlying interrelationships through "interpretative explication" (Thompson,1984)by necessity goes "beyond the data". As Bhaskar (1983:88-89)put it:

> Setting the practice in relation to not just adjacent ones but to relevantly significant features of the wider social whole may lead to crucial redefinitions of meanings and reappraisals of motives including those that formed the indispensable starting point of the research process.

Critical research has been described by Benson(1983) and Outhwaite(1983) as involving two phases: a "description" phase and a "re-description" phase. The description phase involves a presentation of the phenomenon <u>as already defined</u> in everyday practice, i.e. an account of the phenomenon as it exists in the social experience. The redescription phase, on the other hand, in effect recasts, redefines and reinterprets the phenomenon "so as to bring out its complexity, i.e. the way in which it is determined by its internal and external relations as an outcome of a multiplicity of interacting tendencies" (Outhwaite,1983:328).

Thompson(1984) proposes a somewhat similar method in a three-phase process which he calls a "depth-interpretative procedure". Phase one of the procedure involves the description of the social-historical context and conditions, at micro,meso and macro levels. Phase two is

discursive analysis, involving the study of situated linguistic constructions, again at different levels. Phase three then is the interpretation phase which seeks to connect and explain the social and discursive factors and practices presented, among others by showing how the connections among them them serve to sustain relations of domination.

The idea of research as interpretation further alters the micro/macro distinction. The idea of theoretical guidance introduced earlier sought to bring about a redefinition of the social phenomenon early on in the research process, whereby phenomena are conceptualized critically and in the social context. This effect is carried through here into the actual research and analysis process. While in the description phase of research data may be collected at the micro-level, explanations or redescriptions recast the empirically based descriptions, thus eliminating exclusive micro (or, for that matter exclusive macro) based understandings in favor of an understanding based on relationships between levels and practices.

The Direction of Analysis

As discussed above, redescription -or interpretation- changes the level at which we understand our research subject by relating it to the wider social formation. A related and often debated issue is the direction or order that this process of interpretation should follow.

Here we can distinguish between ascending and descending orders of analysis. Descending analysis typically seeks to understand micro-level phenomena as effects or manifestations of macro-level tendencies. Examples of approaches using descending analysis are Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Althusser's notions of "structure-in-dominance", "overdetermination", and "totality". The following is an example of this:

> If the conditions are no more than the current existence of the complex whole, they are its very contradictions, each reflecting in itself the organic relation it has with the others in the structure in dominance of the complex whole. Because each contradiction reflects in itself the structure in dominance of the complex whole in which it exists, and therefore of the current existence of this whole and therefore of its "current conditions", the contradiction is identical with these conditions: so when we speak of the "existing conditions" of the whole, we are speaking of its "conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1969:207-208)

Whereas descending analysis seeks to understand social phenomena as articulations of structural mechanisms and tendencies, ascending analysis takes a different approach. Starting at the microlevel, ascending analysis seeks to understand social phenomena both at their own relatively autonomous level and as parts of more global phenomena.

As described by Foucault, ascending analysis involves:

> ..starting, that is, from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been -and continue to -be- invested, colonised, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended etc. by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination (Foucault,1980:99).

Slack (1984:11)has suggested that a combination of both approaches may be needed to "capture the interplay of power between macro- and micro-structures. Bhaskar (1983:89) goes beyond that by stressing that "totalizing 'outwards' from a specific subject matter is never just a matter of drawing in further bits of knowledge; it is always potentially reciprocal". In the end, the issue of ascending versus descending analysis or some combination between the two is probably more a function of theoretical taste than it is an issue of accuracy as each approach can accomplish the critical requirement of complex, multi-level explanation.

MAPPING OUT RELATIONS

As discussed above, critical analysis requires a "totalizing movement" which places empirical observations in relation to the core structures and tendencies of the social formation. These totalizing movements are and should be theoretically guided, in the sense that they should follow and reflect the relations indicated by the theoretical position used, allowing of course for developments and reformulations in the latter.

One of the problems however in critical organizational research has been that most critical literature contributes little to theorizing the organization as a social practice or as part of the larger social formation. The development, adaptation and use of models which map out existing and potential relations within and between organizations and between organizations and society will greatly facilitate future critical organizational research.

A good example of a model, mapping out organizational and social relationships at and in terms of different levels is provided by Clegg(1981). Starting from a definition of organizations as historically constituted, complex structures in motion, Clegg develops a class-based model of the relationship between organization and society. In this model, organizations are seen as the "sites of the social relations of production that define class structure"(p.551). Control in organizations takes place through sedimented rule structures which operate at all levels within and outside the organization. Further, control systems themselves are seen as class conflicts, evolving from specific intra- and interorganizational relationships between parts of the organization and different levels of the societal class structure.

Clegg's model is a good example for critical organizational researchers in that it uses the idea of structural causality, based in here primarily on the concept of class structure-, while maintaining the idea of organizations as social formations in themselves. In doing so, the model avoids determinism, while still accounting for the power relations that exist between society and organizations.

In addition to developing new models, it is in some instances useful to "translate" or adapt social level concepts to the organizational level. Riley(1983) and Putnam(1985) for example used Giddens' theory of structuration to study organizational processes and Kersten (1984) showed how organizations could be usefully conceptualized and studied on the basis of Althusser's interpretation of practices. While these adaptations are of course not always possible or fruitful, in many cases they will facilitate in making the micro/macro connections that are needed for critical organizational research.

MOVING BEYOND THE SITUATION

Sofar the discussion has addressed problems that are encountered in making the transition back and forth between events, observed at the microlevel and in their particular form, and a theory which requires multi-level analysis. The last issue to be addressed here concerns a different type of problem, namely how to move from the observation of particular situations and cases to a generalized understanding of the social world. The exact form of this type of move is of course determined by the particular phenomenon observed and the way it is related to the social structure at hand. However, there are a number of strategies proposed in the literature that, when used appropriately, may facilitate this part of the critical analysis.

First, there is the idea of "ideal types". The best known example of this in the critical tradition is probably Habermas' "ideal speech situation". The ideas found in most critical positions such as the potential elimination of relations of domination, on the identification of possibilities-- of what can be-- can however also be seen as ideal types. Ideal types are useful in analysis and generalization in that they provide a general standard of comparison, which is kept stable across different studies and situations, creating a basis for identifying common patterns. In addition, ideal types are useful models for guiding action, as Forester(1980) demonstrates in his application of Habermas' model to the practice of community planning.

Second, there is the strategy of abstraction. Essentially what this idea emphasizes is the analysis of social situations, not with an interest in the particular details of that situation, but rather with an eye to its general features(Isaac,1883). In Giddens'(1976) terms this involves the "methodological bracketing" of specific agents and their agency. Thus, using a strategy of abstraction we may move from one case to another--allowing of course for situational variations-- provided we have a sufficient understanding of which are the important general features and how they figure into the overall social formation of which both particular situations are a part.

This strategy of abstraction in similar in a way to Yin's (1981) method of the case comparison approach. Yin compares this method to the craft of detective work, which emphasizes constructing plausible exaplanations capable of explaining different situations simultaneously.

Burawoy's (1985) work stands as an excellent example of the power of comparison. Burawoy applies his thesis that "the process of production decisively shapes the development of working class struggles" by analyzing similar conditions --shopfloor factory work-- in radically different social contexts : the United States and Hungary. Not only does this type of analysis greatly contribute to understanding the relationship between the organization and the state, it also shows the pervasiveness of certain organizational conditions.

Third and last, particular situations may be understood better in relationship to others by focusing on the extremes of conditions. This is suggested among others by Foucault(1980:97)stating that "one should try to locate power at the extreme points of its exercise".Bhaskar (1983:91) also points out that " a long tradition in the human sciences from Marx, Durkheim, Freud through to Garfinkel has confirmed the usefulness of the postulate of the methodological primacy of the pathological":

> Looking at failed, incompleted, bungled actions (unsuccessful species, fractured individuals, conflictual relations, contradictory systems) is not just as important; methodologically it is, if anything, more important. For in bringing out just those features of a successful action or adaptation which the very success of the action tends to elude or obscure, it guards against any reversion to a pre-Darwinian view of the world as either obvious(cf. empiricism) or numinous(cf. idealism) (Bhaskar,1983:90-91).

CONCLUSION

Critical approaches to the study of society and organizations tend to favor theories and models which stress the complex processes of mutual determination and influence between human agency and social structure. While these positions are theoretically stimulating, they have been difficult to apply in research studies. This paper has been an attempt to facilitate this transition from theory to research and, ultimately of course action, by working through some of the problems and issues faced by researchers.

Obviously much work remains to be done, both in terms of dealing with the specific problems that were the concern of this paper and in terms of related questions of method and explanation. The critical approach badly needs applications as well as examples, theoretical and practical ones. Ultimately the only protection --for any theory-- against irrelevance lies in application and action. Hopefully the ideas suggested here will contribute to stimulating both.

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